SIGHT SAVING CLASSES FOR
CHILDREN
By Helen J. Coffin
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Sight Saving Classes for School Children

HELEN J. COFFIN

WHEN Tony was 5 years old he entered kindergarten in one of the best schools in the city—eager, enthusiastic, thrilled at this new adventure! Tony, his mother and his grandmother felt proud.

But when Tony was promoted to 1-B things did not seem to go well. He often felt tired and sleepy in school; many times the teacher asked him things that he could not understand—things about pictures on the wall, writing on the blackboard and stories on a big chart. It all seemed strange and puzzling; the other boys and girls pleased the teacher by answering her and talking about what they saw, but Tony couldn't see any fun in looking for answers when it made his eyes hurt and smart and did not make him any wiser.

Tony Thought He Was Dull

One day the other children received cards saying "1-B to 1-A," but Tony's said "1-B, not promoted." No one in his home knew just what that meant, but Tony had a feeling that it was a disgrace. His friends teased him and called him names, and he began to feel that he was not a bright boy. Bristling with righteous indignation, he began to assert himself with his playmates and won by pugilistic methods what he had lost in class prestige.

This worked pretty well, and Tony found that the next time the cards were passed out he was promoted. Then he had a new teacher, and the same disgrace befell him again—a card marked "2-B, not promoted." He hated school more and more; his head ached and he just could not read. He liked to hear stories, and the teacher called him lazy when he said he could not read one. He decided he must fight some more; and both in the classroom and outside of school he became the despair of the teacher; he was the leader in all the trouble he could possibly make. He was marked as a dull, stupid, mischievous boy, with a tendency to play truant.

One day the school nurse came with a test chart!

"Why, Tony can't see any but the biggest letters! Didn't you know that?"

"Oh my, no! I have always kept him in the back seat; he was so lazy and stupid," replied the teacher. "What an injustice I have been doing him! Why didn't Tony tell me that he couldn't see?"

Tony himself had not known what was wrong. His mother could not understand about glasses; it took several calls from the nurse and the visiting teacher to convince Tony's family that his eyes were imperfect, that his vision, even with glasses, was below normal, and that he would have to go to a sight saving class for the educational opportunity which the school had not given him.

Cleveland's Sight Saving Classes

Tony is one of 220 pupils in sight saving classes in Cleveland this year. When he went into his new class, he was given a book with large, clear type—type so large that it took about three books to hold all the stories that before had been in one. Tony had a teacher who knew how to prepare his lessons so that he could see. Sometimes the work was on the blackboard in large, clear, white letters; sometimes it was on a big chart directly in front of him, for he had a desk which he could move up to the chart. He learned to write large letters with a heavy crayon pencil and to listen to stories read aloud. He learned to use his hands to save his eyes. Best of all, Tony found that he could keep up with his grade; he recited all his oral lessons with the regular class, sat in the front seat and took pride in the correctness of his answers.

After Tony had been in the sight saving class about a year, his teacher was heard to remark, "I believe the sight saving class has done more for Tony than save his sight; it has saved the boy! He had such a bad record when he came here, and now he likes school and has made up his lost grades. He is the best boy in my class."

For the last fifteen years Cleveland has been providing classes for children who are blind and with partial sight. In 1909, eighteen pupils with defective vision were enrolled in a public school class; there they were taught to read braille. Since the establishment of the first class there has been a decrease in the number of blind children compared with the increase in the total school enrolment. Cleveland takes a tremendous amount of satisfaction in pointing to a record which shows that in 1924 there was only one school child in every 4,367 who was taught to read with his fingers, while in 1910 one child in every 3,708 school children had to learn to read with his fingers.

In 1915, a state law went into effect requiring all cases of inflammation of the eyes of the new-

born to be reported to the health department within six hours, and requiring the use of a prophylactic treatment (silver nitrate, 1 per cent). Blindness from babies' sore eyes, one of the largest single causes of blindness in school children, has been practically eliminated from the community since this law has been put into effect.

Another factor in the decrease in the number of pupils in classes for the blind has been the steady increase in the number of pupils attending sight saving classes. The first sight saving class was opened in Cleveland in 1913, with a nucleus of pupils from the braille classes who were unable to see enough to do the regular grade work, but who saw too much to be required to read braille. The enrolment in these classes has been gaining steadily in comparison with the entire school enrolment, and last year approximately one child in every 600 was found to require the special educational opportunities of the sight saving class.

Through effective medical inspection almost every child in Cleveland with seriously impaired vision is referred to the eye clinic and subsequently placed where he may receive equal educational opportunities regardless of a serious visual handicap. The earlier these little pupils enter the sight saving class the less time they waste in repeating work and the better chance the teacher has to instill sight saving habits.

The aim of a sight saving class is to provide for children who cannot see an education which is equivalent to that provided for all children with normal vision; at the same time, the sight saving class insures the conservation of sight. Children with defective vision are under educational experts whose duty it is to teach them, with due regard to their physical condition; they are also under the constant supervision of the school oculist. Under ordinary school methods progressive eye conditions, such as extreme nearsightedness, tend to become rapidly worse, and the assistance and advice of the ophthalmologists are constantly necessary.

In order that these pupils may not be coddled, they enter into competition with pupils with normal vision, and learn that the standards of achievement must be the same in spite of physical defect.

Another type of sight saving class is that for pupils with trachoma, an infectious eye disease that has always impelled exclusion from school. The separation of these pupils in a segregated classroom and the constant supervision and treatment of their eyes by the city health department and the school oculists have reduced the number of pupils in this group from a maximum of twenty in 1922 to eight at the present time. These pupils may use their eyes when they are not badly inflamed, but they are obliged to take a great deal of their work orally. Constant supervision is necessary to see that they do not strain their eyes. This disease, unchecked, is the cause of a number of cases of total blindness.

A visual handicap is an expensive handicap to surmount, because so large a part of our education is visual. To replace the usual means of education by methods that emphasize auditory and tactile processes of learning requires special appliances and extraordinary skill and tact on the part of the teachers.

These special educational opportunities are sometimes thought to have a high per capita cost, but what would be the cost to the community if these children received no education, or gained it at the expense of their sight?

Photo Courtesy Oregon Agricultural College

HAROLD: *"Who says a baby doesn't like spinach? It is one of the most delicious foods."*

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